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From Adelaide to Genoa: Locating Catherine Martin's Lost Fiction

Katherine Bode

This book collects for the first time and restores to readers five previously lost stories by Catherine Martin: South Australian feminist, socialist, world traveler, and one of Australia's most significant nineteenth-century authors. In literary criticism of the 1890s, Martin features alongside writers such as Rolf Boldrewood, Ada Cambridge, Henry Kingsley and Catherine Helen Spence as a key figure of the emerging Australian literary tradition. Indeed, Spence singled Martin out from all of their contemporaries as the only "Australian novelist of genius".¹ Like all of these nineteenth-century authors, Martin's fiction was published in newspapers, with Adelaide publications especially important for showcasing her writing and supplementing her income as a journalist. But Martin's habit of publishing anonymously or under pseudonyms means that these stories have until now been unknown to contemporary readers, even as her major works – *An Australian Girl*, *The Silent Sea* and *The Incredible Journey* – have continued to be reissued, read and discussed. In collecting these stories this book enables a fuller sense of Martin's literary career, including the important connections between her major works, life and newspaper fiction. It also presents for the first time nineteenth-century Australia writing that is intrinsically interesting, often humorous and always thought provoking.

Martin's journey from childhood poverty to international renown as an author itself suggests the narrative arc of fiction. Martin was born Catherine Edith Macaulay in 1847 on the Isle of Skye and moved, aged eight, with her family to Australia. In Scotland the Macaulays were poor crofters: tenant farmers working a small landholding. They made the journey to Australia with assistance from the Highland Emigration Society, a philanthropic organisation that promoted and assisted emigration as a solution to economic destitution. Just months after the family arrived in South Australia and settled in Naracoorte in the colony's south-east, the father, Samuel, died of dysentery.

¹ All citations from Spence's letters are taken from Margaret Allen's "Biographical Background" in the Academy Editions of Australian Literature volume of *An Australian Girl*, edited by Rosemary Campbell, and published in 2002 by the University of Queensland Press.

What would seem a very poor and unlucky start in Australia was transformed by the family's hard work and perspicacity. The Macaulays began as farm labourers. By the time Catherine Macaulay moved to Adelaide in 1876, aged 29, one brother was a respected teacher and at least two others were leading pastoralists. Martin, herself, was well educated, fluent in a number of modern languages, particularly German, and widely read in literature, theology and philosophy; she had helped to establish and had taught in a school with her mother and sister; and she had published her first book, a poetry collection entitled *The Explorers and Other Poems*. Such was Martin's education and bearing that, upon encountering her for the first time at the University of Adelaide's inauguration in 1876, Spence thought her "the daughter of a wealthy squatter of the south-east", only later discovering that she was, like Spence, "a litterateur trying to make her living by the pen". Spence – a respected journalist, Unitarian preacher, social advocate, philanthropist and suffragist, as well as an esteemed author – became an important mentor, close friend and intellectual influence for Martin.

It was probably Spence who introduced Catherine Martin, then Macaulay, to her future husband Frederick, an accountant, social reformer, writer and member of the Unitarian congregation, where Spence attended and preached. Catherine and Frederick were married in 1882, when she was 34. The marriage seems to have been a happy and equal one. They were "comrades", Martin was later to write to Spence, sharing a belief in social justice, a desire to write and, as their life together showed, to travel and to see the world.

In 1888 Martin travelled alone to Europe to study and write, and it was in this period, and prior to her return to Australia in 1890, that her most celebrated work, *An Australian Girl*, was written and published. Though this novel is a romance, it is far from typical, and features a compromised marriage as well as extended reflections on philosophical and theological themes. In 1891, the Martins together departed for Europe, where they remained until 1894; it was during this period that Martin's second major work, *The Silent Sea*, was completed and published. Part thriller part romance, *The Silent Sea* drew on Martin's experience living at the Alma gold mine near Waukaringa, where Frederick was the purser or accountant. The Martins made other extended trips to Europe, to study and to write, until Frederick's poor health led them to return to Australia where he died, in 1909, of tuberculosis. After Frederick's death Martin continued to travel. Her final novel, *The Incredible Journey*, recognised as the first Australian work to centrally feature an Aboriginal character, was finally published (after rejections and revisions) in 1923. In 1932 Martin returned to South Australia for the final time, dying in Adelaide in 1937.

The stories collected here were originally published in three distinct periods of Martin's writing career. The earliest two, and the first two in order of their appearance in this collection, appeared in the early 1880s, immediately before and after Martin's marriage to Frederick and at a time when she was publishing other short fiction for the Adelaide press. "How I Pawned My Opals" was published in the 1881 Christmas eve issues of the weekly *Adelaide Observer* and its companion daily paper, the *Evening Journal*, under the pseudonym "H. Derwent"; "A Stray Kitten" appeared in the Christmas supplement to the *Adelaide Observer* in 1883, without attribution but with a note describing it as by the author of the earlier story. The middle, and longest, story collected here, "Mrs Archibald Thorndale's Dog," was published almost a decade after these two short stories, as the Christmas Story in the *Leader*, Melbourne's major weekly newspaper, in 1890. It thus appeared just after *An Australian Girl* had been published, and as that book was garnering critical acclaim in the British and Australian press. The story was published anonymously but described as by the author of that major work, as were the final two stories collected here. "Hänslein's Disappearance: A Story of Saxon Switzerland," and "Teresa's Betrothal: A Tale of the Coral Fishery," were published almost another decade later, in Adelaide's *Chronicle* in 1897 and 1898, respectively, during an extended period the Martins spent in Australia prior to their final trip together to Europe.

Although separated in time, these stories share a number of themes that characterise Martin's other, known works. As is often noted in discussion of *An Australian Girl*, all of these stories have an independent and strongly delineated female character at their core. These characters are different in many ways. The protagonists of "How I Pawned My Opals" and "A Stray Kitten" are both Australian: but Nell is middle class, the daughter of a rural doctor, while Helen is a rich Adelaide heiress. The other protagonists are not Australian; Lily, in "Mrs Archibald Thorndale's Dog," is a wealthy American living in Paris who travels to Adelaide with her new husband; Marie, in "Hänslein's Disappearance," is an Englishwoman, daughter of a classics scholar, living in Germany; and Teresa, of "Teresa's Betrothal," is an Italian peasant girl. Despite these differences, all of these central female characters are decisive and determined, and resist or actively go against the mores of their respective societies.

With the exception of the Italian Teresa, who has little formal education, all of these female characters are also highly opinionated, outspoken, intelligent and well read. Nell quotes German poetry to her sister's fiancé, Dick, translating it for him when he admits, "I understand 'das' and 'Sie,' the rest of the meaning is a little vague"; Helen mocks the

pessimism of modern writers, while Lily is conversant with the habits of Bedouin Arabs and argues vigorously with her husband-to-be about the depiction of feminine virtue in French playwright Molière's *L'école des Femmes*. Marie translates and supports her father's work on contemporary German politics. For her depiction of Stella Courtland in *An Australian Girl*, Martin has long been seen as responsible for creating a uniquely Australian form of the New Woman. These stories show that she conceived of this figure as a global phenomenon, an emerging sisterhood of women independent in thought and action.

Two other, common threads often remarked on in Martin's known works and present in these newly discovered titles are explicit references to European intellectual traditions and debates, and a concern with poverty, social justice and equality. Literary allusions suffuse these stories, with references to Ancient Greek plays, Norse legends and German poetry alongside allusions to numerous British playwrights, poets and novelists. Martin's knowledge of German, French and Italian is on display, as is her familiarity with key theological, philosophical and political debates of the time. The depth of learning in Martin's writing is often presented through the thoughts and actions of the female protagonists – they are the ones who quote Shakespeare or reference German philosophy – and the same is true of the commitment to social justice.

In all of these stories the female protagonists have, or come to have, an appreciation of the difficulties of poverty, whether because they are poor and must work hard to earn a living (as is the case in "Teresa's Betrothal"), because they encounter people in desperate need (in "A Stray Kitten" and "Mrs Archibald Thorndale's Dog") or because an event occurs that means they run out of money and have to budget and plan for how to acquire some more (in "How I Pawned My Opals" and "Hänslein's Disappearance"). Although Martin escaped the extreme poverty of her childhood, she had to work to support herself for much of her life, and this understanding of financial necessity and insecurity clearly informs these stories.

More broadly, they demonstrate Martin's sharp eye for social pretension and injustice. Much of the considerable humour in the earlier stories is directed toward deflating social pretensions, whether the self importance of the citizens of Hamlington in "How I Pawned My Opals", or the *faux* modesty of the "respectable matrons" of Adelaide in "A Stray Kitten". Particular satiric bite is reserved for those who profess religious belief without humility or compassion for others. Thus, in "Mrs Archibald Thorndale's Dog," we are introduced to an Archdeaconness who alludes to "the Almighty as the Great Disposer of Events with a certain air of patronage, as if she had promoted Him to the Directorship of a Joint-Stock Company", and to Lady Keightley, "a stanch churchwoman, and, as we all know, the first instinct of most

orthodox Christians when aggrieved by any one is to visit the offender with pain in mind, body or estate”.

Such deflations of titled characters signal Martin’s rejection of colonial social hierarchies based upon old-world models, a characteristic of her writing also widely noted in her novels. At the same time, and as funny as many of these asides are, their focus here, as elsewhere, on female characters introduces something of a discord into the feminism of Martin’s fiction. The status quo in all of these stories is represented and rejected in terms of the narrow-minded censoriousness of older women, not the social power and freedoms accorded to men. Accordingly, in breaking free of social mores, the young heroines inevitably clash with older female characters, and Martin presents these clashes with a derision of – even a certain anger toward – older women that never extends to the male characters. One might say that Martin largely reserves her ire for the assistants, rather than the chief beneficiaries, of women’s social and political inequality in the nineteenth century.

Where the earlier stories use humour, the final two explore social justice and inequality with a more serious tone. As well as foregrounding the economies and sacrifices arising from Teresa’s family’s lack of money, “Teresa’s Betrothal” describes the hard labour and poor conditions of men on ships sent to harvest coral for the jewellery market. In “Hänslein’s Disappearance” the concern with social inequality is in particular earnest, and expressed in terms that allude to Martin’s husband, Frederick’s, political activities and writing. While Martin spent their European trips writing fiction and meditations on daily life, Frederick learned and wrote about industry and labour in the countries they visited, publishing at least sixty-three articles in Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper under the heading of “Labor in Other Lands.” In “Hänslein’s Disappearance”, Marie’s father loses his job and is imprisoned for writing about the “military burdens of Germany” and how these fall “heaviest ... upon the poorest”. The eventual title of this treatise – “The Conditions of Labor in Germany” – echoes the title of Frederick’s work and suggests the importance Martin attached to socialist politics.

A commitment to social justice perhaps underpins an unusual theme common to three of these stories: the central female character’s devotion to an animal or animals. In “A Stray Kitten”, Helen rescues a cat from being strangled by street urchins and becomes deeply attached to it; the title of “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog” expresses some of the centrality of that animal to the story, as well as the complex threesome presented by Lily, her enormous St Bernard Gustave and her husband, Archie. For much of the story Lily’s devotion to the dog is contrasted with her aloofness to her new husband. The title of “Hänslein’s

Disappearance” likewise references an animal: Hänslin is one of Marie’s two much-loved kookaburras, given to her by a Brisbane cousin. Characters’ integrity, and particularly their relationship to superficial social opinion, is largely indexed in these stories by their tolerance or lack of tolerance for these animals. The animals’ freedom to express loyalty, love, joy or disdain also signifies and celebrates a space beyond social strictures. We are told this directly, though jokingly, in “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog,” when Lily excuses the St Bernard’s tendency to knock over ornaments with his tail by reflecting that, “Gustave has too strong a sense of virtue. He would like to destroy all that is vicious in art and life. Of course, the thing is impracticable, for what would be left?”

Contemporary literary critics often frame Martin’s commitment to social justice in terms of her sympathetic portrayals of Aboriginal people. There are no parallels in these stories to Stella’s ethnographic interest in Aboriginal culture in *An Australian Girl* and *The Silent Sea*, or to the depiction of Aboriginal motherhood in *The Incredible Journey*. And the only reference to Australia’s indigenous people, in “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog,” is somewhat ambiguous. As the ship bringing Lily, Archie and Gustave to Australia comes close to the shore another passenger asks: “‘Are there no natives – no little villages anywhere?’ ... with that sinking of the heart which a wide expanse of desert country awakens in those who see it for the first time.” No commentary is made on this question beyond Archie’s blunt reply that: “We have killed all the natives ... and the villages have not yet begun.”

While this reference to Aboriginal genocide is almost certainly intended as a critique of colonization, in contrast to Martin’s reputation for progressive depictions of different races and cultures, these stories contain a number of racist character portraits. The xenophobic descriptions of Chinese and Arab characters occur in passing and represent common nineteenth-century prejudice about people of non-European descent. The anti-Semitism on display in two of these stories, and particularly in Martin’s portrait of the avaricious Jewish pawnbroker in “How I Pawned My Opals”, is more marked and extended. This element signals the dark side to Martin’s interest in socialism and German and French culture, reproducing widespread negative associations of Jewish people with capitalism and/or greed.

Although sharing major themes, these stories also demonstrate distinctive features, with a particular shift in the centrality of Australia to these narratives, and in the meaning and importance of romance to female characters’ lives. “How I Pawned My Opals” and “A Stray Kitten” have a humour and lightness of touch that resembles some of Martin’s other, early newspaper fiction, including two stories previously published in 1878: “A Bohemian Born”

and “After Many Years”. But unlike these fictions, and the later ones collected here, “How I Pawned My Opals” and “A Stray Kitten” are set entirely in Australia and offer vivid portraits of colonial Australian life. The former moves from the peace and beauty of a rural garden crowned by Nell’s favourite Moreton Bay fig tree, to the “spectacle” of Melbourne’s Elizabeth Street the day after Melbourne Cup. Adelaide is the setting for “A Stray Kitten”, which gently satirises a society that imitates “the modes in which the aristocracies of old countries kill the time” at night – with balls and cards – while having, unlike those aristocrats, to work for a living during the day.

As with their depiction of Australian settings and society, these early stories resemble *An Australian Girl* in the centrality of the romance plot. However, where the marriage in that major work was unfortunate and unsettled, the romantic relationships in these stories are much more orthodox. The romantic narrative in “How I Pawned My Opals” is characteristic of nineteenth-century women’s writing (and indeed, of contemporary romance fiction). After misunderstandings arising from the heroine’s stubbornness and the hero’s jealousy, love is declared, and the story ends with engagement and a ball.

In contrast, and despite its somewhat saccharine title, “A Stray Kitten” offers a thoughtful critique of relationships between men and women. Its first part establishes the paucity of typical relationships of this type, where social mores and the separation of the sexes prevent meaningful connections. The story’s second part uses conversations between the independent and intelligent Helen Seymour and the somewhat curmudgeonly but accomplished journalist Gabriel Thornton to show the potential of relationships between men and women to be the most enriching of social interactions. This prospect is inflected by a fair degree of intellectual superiority: it is “men of limited intelligence, who have associated only with women of inferior intellect and narrow minds”, who have unfavourable views of women, and vice versa. But the meeting of minds and hearts that is portrayed – Gabriel’s dream for their future together features Helen “glancing over his proofs, and making the most astounding suggestions” – offers a remarkably modern notion of marriage between intellectual equals, based on shared interests and mutual admiration and encouragement.

A marriage is also central to “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog.” But this story bears little resemblance to a conventional romance plot. While nineteenth-century romance fiction typically ends with a marriage, the formal union of Lily and Archie occurs very early in the story – preceded by arguments rather than declarations of love – and once conducted does not appear to bring Lily much happiness. Rather, the relationship is rendered with deliberate distance from romance conventions, and with an ambivalence about marriage reminiscent of

An Australian Girl, published only months prior to this story. In that novel, Stella Courtland has to decide between two suitors: Anselm Langdale, an intellectual English doctor, and Ted Ritchie, a poorly educated but rich Australian pastoralist. Her choice of Ted is shown to be a mistake when he is revealed as an alcoholic as well as her intellectual inferior. The marriage in “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog” is a similarly complicated three-way affair: not only does Lily show more affection for her dog than her husband, as noted already, but the St Bernard is a gift from a previous suitor, a “young *attaché*, at the British Embassy, who lost his life in the Bernese Alps.”

It is not at all clear that Lily felt any affection for this earlier suitor, and Archie has no similar affliction as alcoholism. Although Archie is something of an intellectual follower in contrast to Lily’s radical independence of thought, his honourable character and devotion to Lily and her dog make her coldness to him all the apparent due to the lack of a clear cause for it. And where Stella Courtland is noted for her nationalism, in “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog” Lily appears to strain against the limitations of Australian society as much as of marriage. Lily is a citizen of the world. An American who has spent most of her life in Paris, she has also lived in London, Vienna, Rome, Dresden, Florence, Japan, Norway and “the East”. While she is distanced from Archie from the first moments of their marriage, that disconnection seems to grow with her vehement dislike for her husband’s Adelaide friends and family: their pseudo intellectualism and snobbishness as well as the demands they place upon her.

In a thoughtful reading of *An Australian Girl*, Amanda Nettelbeck describes that novel’s ambiguous and unsettled marriage as a conflicted response to the limited opportunities available to female protagonists in nineteenth-century fiction. Stella Courtland’s situation at the end of the novel – of marriage to the wrong man, coupled with a newfound devotion to social justice and religion – both frees her “from the narrow limits of the romance plot” while tying her to other ideals of Victorian womanhood.² “Mrs Archibald Thorndale’s Dog” concludes with a similar sense that Lily’s potential can be realised elsewhere than in romantic love: with the possibility of helping the poor. But in contrast to *An Australian Girl*, there is also a sense of love blossoming between Lily and Archie (although the reason for this situation is open to interpretation). Despite such differences, both works’ treatment of women’s complex relationship to love and marriage suggest the

² See Amanda Nettelbeck’s “Introduction” to *Catherine Martin An Australian Girl*, edited by Graham Tulloch and published in 1999 by Oxford University Press.

value of reading *An Australian Girl* alongside this previously unpublished story in understanding Martin's distinctive contribution to both Australian literature and nineteenth-century women's writing.

If the romance plot in "Mrs Archibald Thorndale's Dog" is a compromise between the expectation that women marry and the limitations of this state, the final two stories collected here imagine fulfilment for female protagonists in ways that decentre romantic love and marriage. The end of "Hänslein's Disappearance" suggests the potential for future romance. But this vague possibility is entirely subordinate to the fierce satisfaction that Helen gains from supporting her father's work, in intellectual contributions and by her companionship. Although this female character finds self worth in supporting a man, the story privileges an ideal intellectual partnership rather than a romantic one. In "Teresa's Betrothal," the love between Teresa and her *fidanzato* Carlo is, in one sense, the impetus for all events. But the story unfolds almost entirely in Carlo's absence, and focuses on the religious sustenance that Teresa gains from her faith in God and devotion to the Virgin Mary. In these stories the intellectual and spiritual life, respectively, is upheld as the basis for women's fulfilment rather than the more traditional routes of love, marriage and motherhood.

These final two stories also differ in being set outside of Australia. "Hänslein's Disappearance" alludes to that country in the presence of the two kookaburras, whose fits of "prolonged hooting and jeering" ring out across the Saxony landscape, and in the late arrival of the Brisbane cousin and his mother to the narrative. But Australia is a spectral presence in comparison to detailed descriptions of Dresden and the cultural riches it offers, as well as of the natural beauty of the landscape surrounding the country retreat of Wehlen. Australia is completely absent from "Teresa's Betrothal," which immerses the reader in a richly depicted Italian landscape and way of life, especially through the prominence of Italian language and cultural practices in the story.

These detailed accounts of other places can be tied to Martin's travels in Europe, where she was known to spend time writing observations from life. Two years prior to the publication of "Hänslein's Disappearance" and three years before "Teresa's Betrothal" Martin published a "Vignettes of Travel" series in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper. These brief, evocative accounts of scenes and events from Martin's time in Europe resemble the detailed descriptions of Germany and Italy in these stories, with both indicating the importance of European travel to her writing. While these vignettes rarely mention Australia, one mocks the fatuousness of Australian travellers, "ignorant of any language save the Australian variety

of the English tongue, and ... chiefly anxious that they should get a due return for the money they are spending. As they spend so much,” Martin writes, “and are so impervious to most of what they see this is rather an unequal contest”.³

In light of these disparaging comments on Australians in Europe, the move away from Australia in these stories suggests an ambivalence in Martin’s relationship to her adopted country. Spence once remarked of Martin that, “Europe and especially Italy seems to call to her – and she does not love Australia as you and I do”. The nationalist proclamations of Stella Courtland in *An Australian Girl* mean that Martin is often viewed as a distinctively – even a polemically – Australian author. In contrast, the stories collected here progress from the quintessential Australian girl who is the central character of “How I Pawned My Opals”, to the protagonist of “Teresa’s Betrothal”, who knows nothing of Australia, who is quintessential Italian. This is not an absolute trajectory; Martin returned to Australian scenes and characters in her final, major work, *An Incredible Journey*. But it is a different version of nineteenth-century Australian fiction to the one we often hear: wherein writers are either assertively Australian or timidly follow the models of other places. Martin’s work suggests, rather, a thoroughly cosmopolitan author and world-view, bound to but not bound by the emerging Australian nation.

³ This description comes from Martin’s entry on Freiburg and can be read in full in *Trove*’s at: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/193980701>.